

**FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY  
SUPPORT FOR AN  
ALABAMA MAIN STREET PROGRAM  
MAY 26, 2009**



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## INTRODUCTION

This report is a summary of what was heard and observed by the Main Street team of commercial revitalization professionals who visited Alabama on February 9-13, 2009. This report was prepared for and funded by the Alabama Historical Commission and is part of a larger project to relaunch a Main Street Coordinating Program partner that serves the state of Alabama.

Over the course of four and half days, a team assembled by the National Trust Main Street Center conducted focus groups in Athens, Atmore, Birmingham, Gadsden, and Montgomery. Also during the week, team members met with the Alabama Main Street Steering Committee, a group of possible partners, and also with leaders of the Main Street Birmingham program. This report attempts to convey the most useful information and perspectives gained from listening to the 102 participants in the five focus groups and three meetings. The comments from the focus groups are presented separately from those of the other meetings. Final recommendations on how to structure an Alabama Main Street program will be part of the team's final report.

This team was structured specifically for this project and included:

**Alice Bowsher** is an independent consultant who brings 30 years of familiarity with issues Alabama communities face in preserving their historic places and addressing economic growth, as well as skills in organizational development, strategic planning, and fund raising. She was the Alabama Advisor to the National Trust for Historic Preservation for nine years, and continues as Advisor Emerita. She is a native of Birmingham, with a BA degree from Hollins University and a Masters of Historic Preservation/Architectural History from the University of Virginia.

**Beverly T. Meng** is an independent consultant who was formerly the Executive Director of the Mississippi Main Street Association. Under her tenure, the Mississippi Main Street Program was consistently recognized as one of the top programs in the nation, and was the first Main Street Coordinating Program partner to reach over a billion dollars of reinvestment into local Main Street programs. Ms. Meng is an Advisor Emerita to the National Trust for Historic Preservation after serving for nine years on the Board of Advisors and chairing the Southern Region Board of Advisors. Ms. Meng was the first state coordinator of a Main Street program to serve on the Board of Directors of the National Trust, representing all the Main Street coordinating partners. She currently lives in South Carolina.

**Elise Tinsley** is a Program Officer with the National Trust Main Street Center. She previously worked with the Baltimore Main Streets program, the Main Street coordinating program partner for the City of Baltimore. After this project is completed, Elise will be the primary contact between the State of Alabama and the National Trust Main Street Center.

**Lauren Adkins** is the Assistant Director for Field Services at the National Trust Main Street Center where she has been a staff member since 1991. Prior to joining the National Trust Main Street Center, Ms. Adkins was a Main Street manager for two local programs. She was the team leader.

The team members would like to thank all the people listed below who offered information and insights during the team's visit:

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Alabama Main Street Steering Committee:

David Fleming, Main Street Birmingham, co-chair  
Nisa Miranda, University of Alabama Center for Economic Development, co-chair  
Marsha Bankston, Alexander City  
Tom Chestnut, Auburn University and Alabama Cooperative Extension System  
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Steering Committee Partners:

Stephen Black, University of Alabama, Center for Ethics and Social Responsibility  
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## COMMENTS FROM FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

The goal of the five focus groups was to determine the level of interest in and support for an Alabama Main Street program. While not true marketing focus groups, these meetings were an attempt to hear from a variety of individuals from throughout the state who are engaged in and have a stake in the well-being of their communities. In all, they represented more than 30 towns and cities. We did not seek to build consensus within the groups but did watch for recurring comments or ideas. The participants can be described as follows:

- Connected to an existing Main Street program (manager or board member);
- Connected to a local government and/or a community revitalization agency or effort (mayor, city clerk, city council, county commissioner, industrial development board, economic or community development staff, etc.);
- Local historical commission members (there were probably more because some were counted in the above category instead);
- State representative;
- Downtown merchants or business people with ties to the community's historic identity;
- A few others had a “dream” or a “vision” of their town becoming a destination;
- Chamber of commerce leaders or staff;
- Professional services consultants (representing the fields of planning, architecture, historic preservation, and development planning); and
- People connected in various ways with community preservation, Beautification Board, etc.

## RECURRING IDEAS

- **Local communities need help.** Their issues cut across all points of the Main Street Four-Point Approach® and we spent much time in the focus groups fielding questions about local issues.
  - *Organization.* Local leaders need help getting chambers of commerce and downtown merchants to work with them on downtown revitalization efforts and they have problems raising funds for training, education, brochure development, and staff salaries. They also asked for guidance in starting local Main Street programs.
  - *Design.* Business and property owners don't have funds to rehabilitate their facades and mentioned the lack of a state historic preservation tax credit as a possible incentive. They also need more help from design professionals who understand commercial architecture and how to increase retail sales.
  - *Promotion.* Local leaders want to “bring people back downtown” and need help marketing their downtowns, especially in shifting from traditional advertising to

digital media. It appeared that many communities have had some success in sustaining special events, such as Christmas parades and street festivals. However, they want to create visitation year-round, not just for a single “big-draw” event.

- *Economic restructuring.* They worry about the business mix in their downtown districts and want to learn how to manage that mix. They want merchants to have access to retail and merchandising consultants. They want property owners to fill vacant buildings because they are valuable economic assets, not merely because they are cheap storage spaces. An opportunity that came up several times was the “repopulation” of the state as more people are returning home to Alabama, including Baby Boomers who left in the 1970s and descendants of African American families with much older roots to the state. As one person said, “Alabama is a big secret to outsiders but the locals really love it here. That is the key to our future.”
- **Alabama Main Street is too focused on historic preservation.** We heard that the earlier program provided strong design and historic preservation services but at the expense of the other three points: organization, economic restructuring, and promotion. This sentiment was expressed frequently. In our survey of Main Street coordinating program partners in the southeast, we found that most of them are located in the State Historic Preservation Offices, as is Alabama’s, but have still found a way to build upon the idea of economic development through historic preservation. Participants said that it was still hard to convince public officials that Main Street programs are not a “frill.” They asked for support in educating state legislators, local elected leaders, and appointed officials about the need for and value of local and statewide Main Street programs as an economic development effort.
- **In Alabama, economic development usually means industrial development.** This was also a very common statement. Participants feel that the strong state emphasis on industrial recruitment in the automotive, aerospace, and bio-technology fields has come at the expense of support for downtown revitalization and small business development, which can usually generate more jobs than large industries.
- **Local programs have made progress.** Although the Alabama Main Street Program has been dormant since 2005 and had little contact with the National Trust Main Street Center in recent years, approximately 14 communities still self-identify as Main Street programs. Many of them are members of the National Main Street Network and some attend national conferences. Several of these programs reported that they have seen great improvements in their communities as a result of having a Main Street program in place. For example, Gadsden had a 60 percent vacancy rate when the Main Street program started; now it is only 8-12 percent.
- **Strong interest in bringing back Alabama Main Street.** Most focus group participants agreed that their communities would benefit from the services of a state coordinating program. The reasons mentioned included: getting training, direction, and guidance; having an advocate at the state level; educating municipal and state government officials; and adding prestige to local programs.

One group had reservations and expressed concerns that the program would not be able to “plug me in where I am,” which means that they feared a one-size-fits-all approach. They didn’t want to have to start over to conform to a new program, when they have already taken some “first steps” and wanted to be able to join the program on a “come-as-you-are” basis. We also heard someone question the benefit of being connected to the National Trust Main Street Center and a comment that the program “may be more beneficial for non-entitlement small towns (population less than 3,000) that don’t have professional staff.”

- **Where to house the program.** We did not find much consensus on where to house the program. Generally, the comments boiled down to three options:
  - Some people were excited about the idea of a nonprofit organization that would be separate from state government and were even willing to pay for services—as much as \$3,000 – \$5,000, with a higher cost in the initial years when the program is receiving more intensive services. We also heard resistance to paying for services—pointing out reasons from the current weak economy to a lack of value in the quality of services that were previously delivered by Alabama Main Street in its final years. Setting up a program separate from political administrations was also seen as a significant advantage.
  - Others wanted the program to be housed in a state office but there was no consensus on which agency was best. One person urged that it be in the most powerful state agency, but did not identify which agency that should be. Some people thought the program was very successful as part of the Alabama Historical Commission and that it provided great design services. Others were worried about the ability to position Main Street as an economic development program if it were housed in the Commission and felt that the previous emphasis on historic preservation at the expense of economic development would still be a problem. One comment expressed concern that being a state agency might compromise the Alabama Historical Commission’s willingness to take a strong advocacy position. There was also a concern that the Alabama Historical Commission lacks the strong influence of such state government agencies as the Alabama Development Office or the Alabama Department of Tourism and Travel.
  - As a third option, some people advocated for the program being in an economic development office, either in a state agency or a private economic development organization. We heard comments that economic development in Alabama can be very “political” and, again, the idea that Main Street would get lost in the emphasis on industrial development. Others were concerned that the historic preservation focus would also be lost.
- **Source of funding for Alabama Main Street.** Because of participants’ limited knowledge of how Main Street programs operate, we gathered few useful answers to this question from the focus groups. Sources they mentioned included universities and small business development centers.



- **Potential partners.** The following list of potential partners includes comments from the focus groups about their experiences working with each organization. Some programs were more familiar to participants than others.
  - *Alabama Historical Commission (AHC).* As the sponsor of this study and the current home of the Alabama Main Street Program, the Commission is the best resource for information about Main Street in Alabama. Constituents appreciated timely help with streetscape and building rehabilitation reviews. They felt that the Commission was great for design assistance but not for economic development assistance. Furthermore, there was concern that the Commission may want to avoid taking a strong advocacy position in relation to Main Street issues.
  - *Alabama Development Office (ADO).* We heard that ADO is a tremendous asset but “politics” have been an issue under previous administrations. ADO is perceived as being primarily focused on big industry. Currently, it has a good reputation.
  - *Department of Tourism.* People were excited that 2010 has been designated the “Year of Small Towns and Downtowns” and some had already signed up as partners. Some participants have received help from the Tourism Department and its director, Lee Sentell, was singled out as “a good partner.”
  - *Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA).* Some participants had received help from ADECA, especially around getting grants for projects but at least one person noted that the grants have “lots of strings attached.” It was felt that in the past ADECA didn’t “get” the historic preservation connection and that its primary focus for 25 years was safe water and sewer. There was some concern about heavy-handed politics within the department but also noted that it has been more stable within the past six years. However, some people feared that future political whims could create and eliminate programs quickly within this department.
  - *Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT).* Some thought that ALDOT gives timely reviews and has done some beneficial streetscape projects. However, several people said some of their worst experiences with state governments came from working with ALDOT.
  - *Your Town Alabama and Alabama Communities of Excellence (ACE).* People were familiar with these programs and felt that participating in them was quite useful. In one group, at least half of the participants had participated in a Your Town Workshop or were a designated ACE.
  - *Auburn University’s Small Town Design Initiative.* Several participants had received urban planning counseling through this program and found the information useful.

However, they wanted help in ways to implement the ideas and felt that this assistance would be more useful when offered in conjunction with Main Street technical assistance.

## COMMENTS AND OBSERVATIONS FROM MEETINGS

In addition to the five focus group meetings, team members met with a group of possible partners for a new Alabama Main Street program, the Alabama Main Street Steering Committee, and representatives from Main Street Birmingham. The general comments from all three groups are summarized below. (It should be noted that Main Street Birmingham is not recognized by the National Trust Main Street Center as an official Main Street program and has used only pieces of the Main Street Four-Point Approach® in working with commercial districts in Birmingham. The final report from this project will include ideas for how to incorporate Main Street Birmingham into Alabama Main Street and bring the program into conformance with national standards.)

- **Steering Committee prefers a nonprofit structure.** Members of the Steering Committee were clearly in favor of a nonprofit structure. Among the reasons they cited included the fact that agency heads and priorities are subject to change as the governor's priorities shift and administrations turn over; the state's hiring process can be difficult to work with and staff caliber can be a problem in state agencies; personnel can be hired for political reasons rather than professional qualifications; it is more difficult for broad collaboration to happen in a state agency than in an independent organization; corporate donors prefer a nonprofit to a government agency and it would be difficult to get private funding if the organization is housed in a state agency; and a nonprofit would get better buy-in from non-state agency partners. However, of the 47 Main Street Coordinating Program partners in the country, only nine of them are nonprofit organizations. While more statewide coordinating programs are moving to a nonprofit model, it still represents a small percentage of the established programs. Steering Committee members were very interested in hearing about the success that the Mississippi Main Street Association has enjoyed and saw that as the most practical model for their own success. An issue that later phases of this project may resolve is how to link the programs of the partner groups that compose the Steering Committee more closely with Alabama Main Street.
- **Main Street study Partners group.** Leaders of entities whose interests align with the goals of a Main Street program make up the Main Street Partners group, which include state economic development, tourism, and preservation agencies; universities; utilities; elected officials; professional organizations; and organizations representing mayors and economic development interests. Some have worked with a local Main Street program and several serve on the boards of nonprofits such as ACE and Your Town. While some partners are somewhat well-informed about Main Street, others have very limited knowledge of the program. Members of the partners group were recruited by the Steering Committee because of their knowledge of getting things done in the state, because a state Main Street program has some relationship to their own goals, and because of the potential for them to help make Main Street successful. A portion of the meeting was spent briefing the group on the national, state, and local Main Street programs (organization, services, and funding) and on the effectiveness of the Mississippi state program in terms of recruiting new businesses, job creation, and leveraging public and private investment. Several partners spoke about the need for a program to provide "accessible expertise" and to "make things happen." Lack of funding at the local level was brought up, and led to a brief discussion of costs and sources of

funding in Mississippi. Positive outcomes during the meeting included the League of Municipalities' offer to help educate its membership (mayors throughout the state) about Main Street, including sponsoring a session at its annual convention this May, and an enthusiastic endorsement of a local Main Street program by a state legislator. Several participants urged that Main Street be promoted as an economic development tool. Unfortunately, several key people missed this meeting because of conflicts, but in an earlier meeting the group recognized the need for and expressed general support for such a program. An important next step will be to follow up individually with members of this group, to talk about how Main Street aligns with their goals, to hear their thoughts about how to shape a successful and sustainable state Main Street program, and to seek their help in making it happen.

- **Other housing options.** While the Steering Committee members have strong inclinations toward choosing a nonprofit structure, the other partners are still open to exploring different ideas. Unfortunately, a few key members who had attended an orientation session two weeks earlier were unable to attend this session, resulting in incomplete information. A series of more in depth conversations is planned to more fully assess the level of interest and willingness to participate in developing an Alabama Main Street program.
- **Other potential partners.** These groups were mentioned as possible partners but not discussed in depth: the Alabama cooperative extension system and the League of Municipalities (could provide free space and funding if Main Street served their constituency, and might provide in-kind services), and the Economic Development Association of Alabama (EDAA).
- **State funding.** It has to be noted that whether housed in state government or a private nonprofit, all Main Street Coordinating Program partners receive significant funding from the state government, either as part of a state agency's budget or as a grant from the state to the nonprofit organization. The support varies from 50–80 percent of the program's total budget in other states.

## FOCUS GROUP AND MEETING OBSERVATIONS

We had planned to conduct the focus groups with a tight agenda and a comparable set of questions across all participant groups to produce a quantitative set of data; however, the people attending the meetings quickly revealed much different set of needs. We felt that those conversations were worth the “detour” because they provided good, if different, information. Hearing the questions people had for us and seeing how they reacted to our answers was very useful. Focus group participants took away important information that could help their communities. We also assumed that participants had a certain level of familiarity with the Main Street Four-Point Approach amongst participants—which was not the case—so we changed our questions to reflect the experiences of the participants. The following observations are the subjective views of the team members who participated in the focus groups:

- **Much enthusiasm.** All eight meetings went very well. Participants felt that they had learned much and were obviously excited about the discussions. They lingered long after the meetings to ask team members more questions. They asked to receive information as this project progresses. They also wanted to showcase their downtown revitalization efforts already underway. These meetings have likely built a group of more than 100 people who are now more invested in the idea of an Alabama Main Street program.
- **Many questions.** We had hoped to focus on discussing the opportunities for a statewide program but often had a hard time keeping the conversation on track. Instead, people wanted to learn much more about the Main Street program and the four-point approach. This was surprising to some team members—that people in Alabama were not familiar with the Main Street Four-Point Approach. However, these meetings were the start of providing that education. This great need for more basic information, through training sessions and on-site technical assistance, is clearly a first priority for anyone promoting downtown revitalization in Alabama.
- **Many misconceptions.** From the many comments and questions about basic issues, team members realized that most people did not understand that Main Street revitalization is a comprehensive program and something more than a streetscape or a façade fix-up program. They didn’t realize, or outright rejected, the importance of dedicated staff to produce results. Again, educating people about what a typical Main Street Coordinating Program partner provides and what they can expect from an Alabama Main Street program (and what they will be expected to do) is a first priority as a next step.
- **Roles for Alabama Main Street.** A clear theme from all the meetings was the need for Alabama Main Street to provide networking opportunities for the existing local Main Street programs. We understand that managers from local programs are meeting regularly and they have been quite pleased with the results.

The second role, and perhaps the largest one, will be providing information to anyone in Alabama interested in downtown revitalization. There is a great need for more information. Again, representatives from the Alabama Historical Commission have already started that process by taking advantage of an offer made during one of these meetings to

have an “introduction to Main Street” presentation at the May meeting of the League of Municipalities. Other introductory sessions are being scheduled. While joint training sessions are cost effective ways to help local municipalities, ultimately Alabama Main Street will need to find more ways to provide on-site assistance.

A third role is that of acting as an official National Trust for Historic Preservation Main Street Coordinating Program partner, which can both designate and accredit local programs. Designation and accreditation are separate processes. Main Street Coordinating Program partners can designate local communities without direct involvement of the National Trust Main Street Center. Accreditation is a process that occurs once a year when the National Trust Main Street Center asks all Main Street Coordinating Program partners to submit a list of the designated local programs that meet 10 performance standards. Those standards are attached as an appendix. Even more confusing is the Main Street Network Membership, which some local program leaders thought gave them permission to use the name “Main Street” despite language to the contrary in the membership application. In summary, many of the focus group participants are unfamiliar with procedures of the National Trust Main Street Center and do not realize that they are misusing the “Main Street” name. They were not familiar with the national accreditation (which was introduced after Alabama Main Street went dormant). Consequently, there was little interest in this role (as an organization that provides accreditation) from local program leaders, who think that they already are “official programs.”

Finally, the fourth role would be that of advocate for historic preservation-based economic development as a viable downtown revitalization strategy. Advocating for the program with public officials at all levels and with statewide partners (both public and private) is a very important job that helps raise the visibility of community economic development to that of industrial development in Alabama.

## CONCLUSION

This report summarizes what the consulting team members learned from listening to the 104 participants in the focus groups and other meetings. We have tried to synthesize the most pertinent comments and those heard most often, along with our observations.

For the next steps in the coordinating program's design, the consulting team members will create draft recommendations about housing and funding Alabama Main Street and present those options first to the Steering Committee and then to potential partners and funders. The feedback from those meetings will be incorporated into our final report on how to restructure Alabama Main Street.

The current weak economy may appear to be a reason for not rebuilding Alabama Main Street, but the past 30 years of work from Main Street Coordinating Program partners has shown just the opposite—in a weak economy, the Main Street Four-Point Approach is one of the most cost-effective economic development strategies. As one of the Partner group participants said, “This is a program for desperate times—a program that for a limited investment of money gets results.” Beverly Meng presented great statistics from the Mississippi Main Street Association, which has proven that the cost to the state to create a new business is \$1,092. Furthermore, the cost to the state is only \$191 to create a new job. Clearly, 2010 is the right time to restructure Alabama Main Street, and, according to the participants in these meetings, the need is great and they are ready to work.

## APPENDIX: PERFORMANCE STANDARDS FOR NATIONALLY ACCREDITED MAIN STREET PROGRAMS

### **1. Has broad-based community support for the commercial district revitalization process, with strong support from both the public and private sectors.**

#### *Background:*

At its best, a local Main Street program represents and involves a coalition of organizations, agencies, businesses, and individuals from throughout the community — not just those who own property or businesses in the commercial district or who have a direct economic tie to it, but *all* members of the community who are interested in the community's overall health. Involvement by both the public and private sectors is critical as well; neither sector can revitalize the commercial district without the skills and vantage points of the other. Ideally, both sectors will participate in the revitalization process by providing funding, leadership, and ideas, and by encouraging collaboration between existing programs to assist the revitalization process.

By actively involving a broad range of interests and perspectives in the revitalization process, the Main Street program leverages the community's collective skills and resources to maximum advantage. The overall goal is for a broad range of constituencies from both sectors to understand and be philosophically committed to the revitalization process and, to that end, to commit the maximum resources possible to achieve the goal of revitalizing the commercial district.

#### *Guidelines:*

- The Main Street organization should have the active participation of various stakeholders at the committee and board levels, including such constituents as:
  - local government
  - civic groups
  - regional planning groups
  - community development organizations
  - realtors
  - consumers
  - property owners
  - churches, temples, religious institutions
  - business owners
  - historic preservation organizations
  - local industries
  - school groups and students
  - financial institutions
  - architects and building contractors
  - transportation authorities
  - parking authorities
  - developers
  - district/neighborhood resident



- Participants should contribute financial, in-kind, and volunteer support for the revitalization program.
- Participants should also look for, and act on, opportunities to make connections between other programs with which they are involved and the Main Street revitalization effort so that, by doing their own work a little smarter, or in a more integrated way, other programs help further the revitalization process.
- The program should include an ongoing process for volunteer recruitment, orientation, and recognition, constantly refreshing its pool of volunteers and involving new volunteers each year.
- The downtown revitalization program has broad-based philosophical support from the community.
- Municipal government demonstrates a philosophical commitment to downtown revitalization.

## **2. Has developed vision and mission statements relevant to community conditions and to the local Main Street program's organizational stage.**

### *Background:*

A *mission statement* communicates the Main Street organization's sense of purpose and overall direction. A *vision statement* communicates the organization's long-term hopes and intentions for the commercial district. Both should be developed with broad participation by the board, committees, program volunteers, and community input.

### *Guidelines:*

Some revitalization programs begin with a vision statement; others develop a vision statement after several years of work. *At a minimum*, the Main Street organization should have a mission statement in place, reviewed annually (and updated, if appropriate). If the organization does not have a vision statement at the beginning of the revitalization process, it should develop one prior to the organization's transition from the catalyst phase to the growth phase.

- The organization has an appropriate written mission statement.
- The mission statement is reviewed on annually and updated as appropriate.
- The organization has an appropriate written vision statement.

## **3. Has a comprehensive Main Street work plan.**

### *Background:*

A comprehensive annual work plan provides a detailed blueprint for the Main Street program's activities; reinforces the program's accountability both within the organization and also in the broader community; and provides measurable objectives by which the program can track its progress.

*Guidelines:*

- The work plan should contain a balance of activities in each of the four broad program areas that comprise the Main Street approach — design, organization, promotion, and economic restructuring.
- The work plan should contain measurable objectives, including timelines, budgets, desired outcomes, and specific responsibilities.
- The work plan should be reviewed, and a new one should be developed annually.
- Ideally, the full board and committees will be involved in developing the annual work plan. At a minimum, though, the full board should adopt/approve the annual work plan.
- The work plan should distribute work activities and tasks to a broad range of volunteers and program participants.
- There has been significant progress in each of the four points based on the work plan submitted last year.

**4. Possesses an historic preservation ethic:**

*Background:*

Historic preservation is central to the Main Street program's purpose. The historic buildings and public spaces of a traditional commercial district enrich civic life and add value on many levels to the community. Developing a historic preservation ethic is an ongoing process of education and discovery for a community and for a local Main Street program. Main Street programs that have embraced a strong historic preservation ethic are successful in saving, rehabilitating, and finding new uses for traditional commercial buildings and in intensifying the uses of the district's buildings, through both specific building improvement projects and through policy and regulatory changes which make it easier to develop property within the commercial district.

Some Main Street programs purport to support preservation values, but do not fully understand that preservation is an ethic, not just an activity or group of activities. Historic preservation involves not only the process of rehabilitating, restoring, or renovating older commercial buildings but also the process of adopting planning and land use policies that encourage full use of existing commercial centers before new development takes place, removing the regulatory and other barriers which sometimes make it difficult to attract investment to historic commercial districts.

*Guidelines:*

- The program has, or is working toward putting in place, an active and effective design management program (which may include financial incentives, design assistance, regulatory relief, design review, education, and other forms of management).
- The program encourages appropriate building renovation, restoration, and rehabilitation projects.

- When faced with a potential demolition or substantial structural alteration of a significant, historic, or traditional building in the Main Street district, the program actively works to prevent the demolition or alteration, including working with appropriate partners at the state, local, or national level to attempt to stay or alter the proposed activity; developing alternative strategies for the properties' use; and/or educating local leaders about the importance of retaining existing buildings and maintaining their architectural integrity.
- The program works to find creative adaptive use, financing, and physical rehabilitation solutions for preserving old buildings.
- The program recognizes the importance of planning and land use policies that support the revitalization of existing commercial centers and works toward putting planning and land use policies in place that make it as easy (if not easier) to develop property within the commercial district as it is outside the commercial district. Similarly, it ensures that financing, technical assistance, and other incentives are available to facilitate the process of attracting investment to the historic commercial district.
- The program builds public awareness for the commercial district's historic buildings and for good design.

## **5. Has an active board of directors and committees.**

### *Background:*

Main Street revitalization is an ongoing process of changing a community's attitudes about its traditional commercial district(s). The direct involvement of an active board of directors and committees is key to this process. The Main Street director is responsible for facilitating the work of volunteers, not for single-handedly revitalizing the commercial district. In some areas, and in communities of some sizes, local Main Street programs have been launched by or have merged with other organizations which have a broader agenda (such as a chamber of commerce or a community development corporation). A local Main Street program in one of these circumstances has a better chance of long-term success if it maintains focus on its particular purpose and if its mission statement, work plan, budget, and governing body remain distinct from that of the larger organization in which it is contained.

### *Guidelines:*

- The board is a working, functional board that understands its roles and responsibilities and is willing to put forth the effort to make the program succeed.
- Committee members assume responsibility for the implementation of the work plan.
- The program has a dedicated governing body, its own rules of operation, its own budget, and its own bylaws, and is empowered to carry out Main Street's mission, even if the Main Street program is a part of a larger organization.
- The board has well-managed, regular monthly meetings, with an advance agenda and regular distribution of minutes.

- Committees have regularly scheduled monthly meetings with an advance agenda that addresses the committee work plan.

## **6. Has an adequate operating budget.**

### *Background:*

In order to be successful, a local Main Street program must have the financial resources necessary to carry out its annual and evolving program of work. The size of a program's budget will change as the program matures (in its early years, it may need less money than in its growth years). Also, program budgets are likely to vary according to regional economic differences and community size.

### *Guidelines:*

- The Main Street program's budget should be adequate to achieve the program's goals.
- The budget should be specifically dedicated for the purpose of revitalizing the commercial district.
- The Main Street program's budget should contain funds adequate to cover the salary and fringe benefits of staff; office expenses; travel; professional development; and committee activities.
- The dollar amount that is "adequate" for a program budget may vary from region to region, depending on local costs of living, and may be different for small town, midsize, and urban Main Street programs. General guidelines for *minimum* operating budgets are:
  - *small town programs*: \$30,000+ annually
  - *midsize community programs*: \$45,000+ annually
  - *urban neighborhood programs*: \$80,000+ annually
- Revenue sources are varied and broad-based, including appropriate support from municipal government.
- There is a strategy in place to help maintain stable funding.
- There is a process in place for financial oversight and management.
- Regular monthly financial reports are made by the treasurer to the board.

## **7. Has a paid, professional executive director.**

### *Background:*

Coordinating a successful Main Street program requires a trained, professional staff person. While Main Street directors come from a broad range of academic and professional backgrounds, the most successful executive directors are those who are good communicators; who can motivate volunteers; and who have good project management skills, being able to keep the revitalization program's many activities moving forward on schedule and within budget. In most

instances, the Main Street executive director's position is full-time (generally 40+ hours per week). In small towns without the resources to hire a full-time executive director, a part-time director is usually acceptable (generally 20+ hours per week).

*Guidelines:*

- The Main Street executive director should be paid a salary consistent with those of other community development professionals within the city, state, or region in which the program operates.
- The minimum amount of time the Main Street executive director works each week should be consistent with comparable Main Street programs in the city, state, or region.
- The executive director should be adequately trained — and should continue learning about revitalization techniques and about issues affecting traditional commercial districts.
- The executive director has a written job description that correlates with the roles and responsibilities of a Main Street director.
- There is a formal system in place for evaluating the performance of the executive director on an annual basis.
- Adequate staff management policies and procedures are in place.

## **8. Conducts program of ongoing training for staff and volunteers.**

*Background:*

In order to meet new challenges and ensure a strong organization, Main Street program participants need ongoing training. Participants — both staff and volunteers — need different skills in different phases of the revitalization process; for that reason, the skills a program's participants learn in the program's *catalyst phase* are rarely adequate for the *growth* or *management phases*. As staff and volunteer turnover occurs, new staff members and new volunteers will need basic Main Street training. And, all program participants should stay current on issues that affect traditional commercial districts and on new revitalization techniques and models.

*Guidelines:*

The local Main Street program develops local leadership capacity through such mechanisms as:

- taking advantage of citywide, state, regional, and national training opportunities;
- making reference and training materials available locally — and using them; and
- providing/conducting training when appropriate, including annual Main Street 101 training, annual orientation for board members, and annual committee training.

## 9. Reports key statistics.

### *Background:*

Tracking statistics — reinvestment, job and business creation, and so on — provides a tangible measurement of the local Main Street program's progress and is crucial to garnering financial and programmatic support for the revitalization effort. Statistics must be collected on a regular, ongoing basis.

### *Guidelines:*

- The program collects and tallies statistics related to the revitalization movement, using the baseline criteria listed below. It should keep this data from year to year, providing an economic record of the program's impact over the course of its history. This information is distributed regularly to constituents and in the annual report.
- The program submits regular reports to the statewide, countywide, or citywide Main Street coordinating program (either monthly or quarterly, as specified by the coordinating program).

### *Baseline data should include:*

- Community population
- Net of all gains and losses in jobs
- Net of all gains and losses in new businesses
- Number of building rehabilitation projects
- Number of public improvement projects
- Number of new construction projects
- Number of housing units created: upper floor or other
- Monetary value of private investment spent in above projects: *i.e., individuals or private sources of money spent on building rehabs, public improvements, or new construction.*
- Monetary value of public investment spent in above projects: *i.e., city, county, state, or federal money spent on building rehabs, public improvements, or new construction.*
- Monetary value total of all investment and public and private investment
- Ground-floor vacancy rate when your program started
- Ground-floor vacancy rate now
- Rental rate per square foot when program started
- Rental rate per square foot now

- Your program's annual operating budget

#### **10. Current member of the National Trust National Main Street Network.**

*Background:*

Participation in the National Trust Main Street Network membership program connects local programs to their counterparts throughout the nation, providing them with valuable information resources.

*Guideline:*

- The organization is a current member of the National Trust Main Street Network Membership program.